

# NO JOKER

Having directed hit comedies like *The Hangover* trilogy, *Old School* and *Road Trip*, Todd Phillips might seem an unlikely choice to helm a gritty and grim origin story for DC's iconic villain, the Joker. But armed with the ferocious talent of star Joaquin Phoenix and a more dramatic take on the character, *Joker* is not only one of the best films to feature Batman's nemesis, it's one of best films of the last decade.



"I love the complexity of Joker and felt his origin would be worth exploring on film, since nobody's done that, and even in the canon he has no formalised beginning," says Todd Phillips.

"So, Scott Silver and I wrote a version of a complex and complicated character, and how he might evolve... and then devolve. That is what interested me – not a Joker story, but the story of becoming Joker."

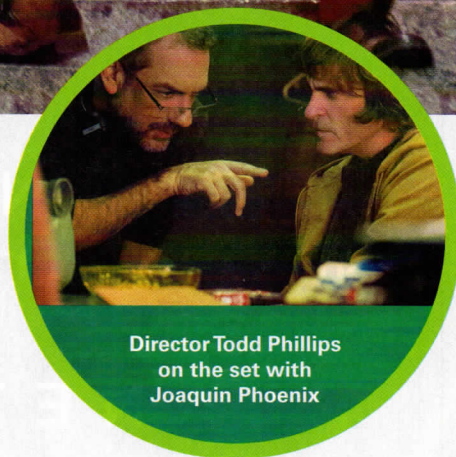
One of the themes the pair wanted to explore in *Joker* was empathy and, more importantly, the lack thereof in the world of clown for hire and aspiring stand-up comic Arthur Fleck – aka Joker.

"He starts out just wanting to make people laugh, trying to put a smile on their faces," says Silver. "That's why he's a clown, why he dreams of becoming a stand-up comic. He just wants to

bring some joy into the world. But then the toxic environment of Gotham breaks him down – the lack of compassion and empathy, the loss of civility... That's what creates our Joker."

Joaquin Phoenix concedes that, even during filming, "There were times when I found myself feeling for him, even feeling like I understood his motivation, and in the next moment I would be repulsed by the decisions he made. Playing this character was challenging for me as an actor, and I knew he would also challenge the audience and their preconceived ideas about the Joker, because in his fictional world, like in our real world, there are no easy answers."

"We often talk about the tip of the iceberg, but we rarely speak about what's underneath – about what gets you there," adds Phillips. "Arthur is the guy you see on the street who you walk right past... or over. With this movie we're hoping to get a peek at what's below the surface."



Director Todd Phillips  
on the set with  
Joaquin Phoenix

Utilising the narrative device of an unreliable narrator that can never be fully believed gave Phillips an enormous amount of freedom when it came to crafting Joker's backstory.

"He says in the comic book *Batman: The Killing Joke*, 'If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice.' So, what really happened, and what you think he is by the end,



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complex and like nothing I'd ever read before," he says. "Todd has a unique way of looking at things that is really perfect, I think, for this movie. When I work with a director, I want somebody who has a singular take on the material, and nobody could have made this movie but Todd."

And with Oscar buzz gathering momentum, the general consensus is that nobody could have played this incarnation of the Joker but Phoenix. Adept at inhabiting disturbed characters – most notably in *The Master* and *You Were Never Really Here* – his performance in *Joker* is a career best, accentuated by a painful physical emaciation



just depends on the lens through which you watch the movie. You won't walk away having all the answers and that's what I think is intriguing about a character like this."

Phoenix concurs: "There were times when I thought Arthur would enjoy altering his story because of the effect it would have on how someone might feel about him, and there were other times where I thought he'd alter it because it's what he really believes. Usually with characters that is frustrating, not understanding their motives; but with this character it became liberating, realising it could go in any direction."

Having resisted genre-inspired projects in the past, the actor was intrigued by Phillips and Silver's script. "I thought it was bold and

• *Joker*  
is out  
Jan 8

that matches the character's mental disintegration.

"I wanted the character to look hungry and unhealthy, like a malnourished wolf," says Phillips.

In many ways, *Joker* feels more a part of Martin Scorsese's universe than Batman's. Robert De Niro's supporting role notwithstanding, the spirit of *Taxi Driver* looms large, with Arthur's gradual descent into madness mirroring Travis Bickle's own tragic trajectory, just as the film's squalid version of Gotham City evokes the mean streets of New York City in the 1970s and '80s.

Indeed, Phillips says he was inspired by the character studies he watched when he was

## PUTTING ON A HAPPY FACE

The Joker's many  
screen incarnations

### CESAR ROMERO

*Batman TV series*  
(1966–68)

"A joke a day keeps the gloom away!"



### JACK NICHOLSON

*Batman* (1989)

"Do I look like I'm joking?"



### MARK HAMILL

*Batman: The Animated Series* (1992–95)

"All it takes is one bad day"



### HEATH LEDGER

*The Dark Knight* (2008)

"Why so serious?"



### JARED LETO

*Suicide Squad* (2016)

"I love this guy, he's so intense."



### ZACH GALIFIANAKIS

*The LEGO Batman Movie* (2017)

"You should be terrified."



younger, which included films like *Serpico*, *Network* and the aforementioned Scorsese classic.

"The look, the vibe, the tone of those films made sense for this story. We included a few elements from the canon and set it in a broken-down Gotham City around 1981, because that harkens back to that era and would remove it from the comic book world we're so familiar with in film today." ⑨